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ABSTRACT

Diversity should be first understood from an individual's own culture. Yet few public relations professionals have had a course in interpersonal communication. If public relations is viewed as a profession where the management of people is important, then knowledge of diversity in the workplace seems imperative. The multicultural, intercultural, cross-cultural and international viewpoints add depth to a person's cultural studies. These terms also suggest particular emphases and viewpoints when working with the concept of culture. A review of the textbooks utilized in public relations and experiences working with public relations professionals of other cultures suggest very few efforts are directed toward diversity development. Further, public relations educators should acknowledge that western principles of public relations may be limited in outreach, particularly in dealing with Asian or Muslim cultures. (Author/SR)

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# Multicultural, Intercultural Diversity -- What Do We Call 'It' and How do these Terms Show up in Public Relations Efforts?

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## Multicultural, Intercultural Diversity -- What Do We Call 'It' and How do these Terms Show up in Public Relations Efforts?

Diversity should be first understood from one's own culture. Yet few public relations professionals have a course in interpersonal communication.

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The multicultural, intercultural, cross-cultural and international viewpoints add depth to one's cultural studies. These terms also suggest particular emphases and viewpoints when working with the concept of culture. A review of the textbooks utilized in public relations and the experiences working with public relations professionals of other cultures suggest very few efforts are directed toward diversity development.

Multicultural, Intercultural Diversity --
What Do We Call 'It' and How do these Terms Show up in Public Relations Efforts?

Observing the Central States Intercultural interest group debate the meaning of their name--whether to be called "intercultural" or "multicultural" illustrates the dilemma felt by many. How can this area of diversity wether called multicultural or intercultural be addressed.

The International Communication Association's diversity dilemma took another direction. The multicultural group split off from the international group to develop what was felt a narrow definition of what "multicultural" is all about. Today, the two ICA groups have proposed that the multicultural interest group and the international interest group now come together. The multicultural group feels their territory has been significantly developed and can hold its own with those who associate themselves with an international orientation. Is there a difference among these terms? What significance is it to be called multicultural, intercultural or international? This is an area that those in public relations should address. This is an area that should be examined fully in a global sense.

However, this is not quite the beginning. If one is to look at diversity in terms of public relations, then there is even a greater richness of definition that needs to be brought forth.

Culture is Basic to One's Study of Public Relations. Diversity in public relations should reference one's own culture. Here you identify one's values. Usually when asked about culture one defaults to race as the total sum of diversity. Here even gender behavior is defined as a culture to be studied. For example, in Europe women are entering the work force faster than at any other time. Plus there are 6 million women who are not classified as unemployed. It is now recognized that a heterogeneous workforce is more competitive and will require more problem solving, innovation, and flexibility. This also suggests one needs to look at the difference between valuing diversity and managing diversity. Plus there is a fine line between what is a gender issue and providing models of successful gender stories.

Significance for public relations professions: Public relations professions more than ever need to be prepared for cultural diversity. If our definition is to focus on the management level, then the management of a cultural diverse workforce will be clearly a challenge. Yet how many of our majors are prepared for this diversity? Where is the curriculum where this is even discussed. This seems to be a starting point that is beyond the discussion of whether this diversity should be a section within one course or embued throughout a course of study in public relations.

So back to the issue of whether a class should have a section or be entirely adapted to cultural awareness. First, on the level of cultural awareness, the entire course should be adapted to cultural awareness.

There is so much going on in terms of interpersonal interaction between genders, race, age, different sections of the United States etc. that one should be sensitive to all the differences. For example, on the east coast, time is much more exact and one should be "on time." In the Midwest, time is a bit more relaxed and being 15 minutes late is not a major problem. On the West Coast being 30 minutes late may not be a major problem. Such differences need to be acknowledged.

The differences need to be acknowledged in terms of how conflict results from these differences. My example comes from organizing a diverse youth chorus in one of the most racially, gender-divided regions of the United States.

The youth chorus is one of the few neutral free grounds for various geographic, racial, cultural groups to mix. The program focuses not only on the youth coming to a regional site (very important) but also going out to the community to travel (usually for the first time).

It is difficult to select music which is acceptable to judges who are not culturally sensitive. There is a real difficulty in dealing with directors who believe that the white male music (especially religious music) is the only model for quality. The listening is sometimes not there for the culturally diverse models.

Even the physical behavior is a cultural irritation point. African-Americans are very loud verbally and much more physically demanding. So in a very proper Center for Visual and Performing Arts, the different ethnic groups affiliated with the chorus seem rather strident to the prim and proper art Center. Even African-Americans who are professional colleagues have admitted there behavior is very "white" with Caucasian colleagues and very different with their own race.

This struggle to adapt to the European model is often subconscious. The obvious tremendous influence of Europe is surfacing now as a concern generally.

For example, a few years back, I was asked to be one of the judges, the only Caucasian judge, for the Miss Black Indiana contest. When the talent section came, there was a great upset among the judges when one particular candidate was about to begin to sing. All I heard was "Oh my God" Oh my God!" What I was about to hear was the most incredible vocal performance that was emotionally draining. When the young performer was done, she composed herself as if nothing had happened and then proceeded to look very poised as a "Miss America." I instinctly knew at that moment there was no chance for that candidate to win. Of course, the one that did win performed poorly on an opera piece (acceptable Euro standard). It was clear what the model of "correctness" would be. It is this lack of cultural diversity in terms of "quality" that everyone is still struggling with. This is really a power struggle where the dominate group finds it difficult to share the wealth or create new models.

RECOMMENDATION: All public relations majors should be required to have a course in interpersonal communication which stresses a multicultural and international point-of-view. This also suggests that

interpersonal communication should have a larger role of importance in the public relations function.

Now beyond culture to a multicultural, intercultural, and international perspective. This first definition suggests that all of us need to be aware of the cultural trappings we carry with us. Then one can be challenged to think about a cross-cultural test to see how prepared one is to cross into another culture. This cross-cultural awareness can be tested with the U.S. Navy test, a multiple choice test given to navy recruits before allowed off ship.

Multiculturism suggests that "different cultures coexist while maintaining their distinct and separate identities." (Miller, 1993) Intercultural or cross-cultural are often preferred titles to suggest this mix of cultures when countries are more determined by boundaries. International is often viewed as countries outside of the United States (a misnomer since the U.S., too is an international country).

How do these concepts appear in our academic materials. Unfortunately what one finds in public relations texts is a minimal recognition of the multicultural or intercultural point-of-view. Certainly most texts at least minimally recognize the growing segments of people of color. Some texts discuss the international and global perspectives. However no text provides an indepth analysis of issues from an international and global perspective.

For the last two weeks, I have been hosting a professor from the United Arab Emirate. Dr. Mai Ala-Khaja is in the United States visiting public relations programs in Iowa, San Jose, Texas, Indiana, Washington D.C. and Maryland. Dr. Mai also shared her arabic-muslim culture.

What immediately became noticeably clear is that much of our public relations case studies is based on the first amendment or the free expression of speech. Dr. Mai could not consider this as a possibility since in their culture freedom of speech is not allowed. The Koran serves as the focal point of their culture and their religion. So public relations is taught according to the principles of the Koran. Scholar tend to point out that having democracy as the cornerstone of a country will assure public relations. However, the UAE is obviously establishing public relations without democracy. Perhaps democracy is not the basis for public relations and, if not, then public relations is entering into a new era.

Dr. Mai was very disappointed the bible could not be the focus of our public relations efforts. Here is a Ph.D. who would like to develop a parallel source for public relations and yet found student group after student group negating the bible as a common source of knowledge. As part of the dialogue I offered the constitution and the Bill of Rights as our central common focus for public relations. Of course, this does not mean one has a license to do what they want. I further explained the U.S. judicial system as the interpreter of these documents.

Interpretation, per se, seems a bit strange for someone who accepts the written word as the final say.

Interestingly enough the largest professional association of communicators, Women in Communication, Inc. is also primarily focused upon freedom of speech. Yet in their recent efforts to become international, the recruiter noted that freedom of speech was not a priority among all countries and was looking for models of communication that all cultures could subscribe to.

Recommendation: That public relations educators acknowledge the western principles of public relations may not relate in all cases. That the Euro version of public relations may be limited in outreach, particularly in dealing with the Asian or Muslim cultures.

Does this answer the question of how translatable our public relations knowledge is to other cultures. As the Chinese Communication Association struggled with this issue, I offered a thought: "Be very careful about adopting the American knowledge carte blanche. Approach our knowledge from a cultural understanding and realize what has to be modified." Perhaps only through this approach can we avoid the catastrophic effect other disciplines have experienced. Remember the Japanese are suffering greatly with their economic woes. There are no business schools in Japan. The Japanese learned their knowledge here in the United States. Hopefully, we have learned from this experience.

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